

EXHIBIT 1

New Clarkstown law may sink Catholic church plan

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(Photo: Carucha L. Meuse/The Journal News)

VALLEY COTTAGE - The first test of a new Clarkstown law geared toward preventing overdevelopment along town roads has arrived.

St. Peter's Syro-Malankara Catholic Church of Rockland has submitted a proposal to construct a two-story, 11,000-square-foot church on Mountainview Avenue.

In recent months, the proposal has run up against opposition from residents who say the development is not suited for the residential neighborhood, and will increase traffic and negatively impact wetlands in the area.

But the most significant roadblock to the project may be a new law that limits requests for non-residential uses and developments in Clarkstown to state and county roads.

"We just want the zoning board to uphold the law," said Valley Cottage resident Ed Mooney.

The rules have changed

The property at 464 Mountainview Ave. has remained the same since the church purchased it in 2013, but the laws have not.

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Philip Mathew, a member of St. Peter's, said in a phone interview this week that the church bought the 4.3-acre property with the goal of constructing its own facility there to hold weekly services and Sunday school.

The Mountainview Avenue property, half of which is located on wetlands, is heavily wooded and overgrown with vegetation. A small, dilapidated house
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In 2013, a church could be built there.


Last year, the Clarkstown Town Board amended a zoning law that requires all uses other than single-family residences to have frontage and access to a state or county road. Mountainview Avenue is a town-owned road.

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"We bought the land knowing at the time it was approved for the church," Mathew said. "If we couldn't build on the property, we wouldn't have purchased the property."

Supervisor George Hoehmann said the local law was passed to prevent non-residential developments — commercial buildings, schools, and religious institutions — from being placed in residential areas.



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George Hoehmann (Photo: File photo by Peter Carr/The Journal News)

The law's intent was to restrict uses that would increase traffic, pollution, and overcrowding along town roads, among other things.

Hoehmann said he stood by the law.

"Schools and houses of worship in areas where they're not allowed by the zoning is something I don't favor," the supervisor said. "I wouldn't move away from that."

The church's proposal is scheduled to go before the Clarkstown Zoning Board of Appeals on May 22.

In search of a home

Founded in 2002, St. Peter's Syro-Malankara Catholic Church has never had a permanent home.

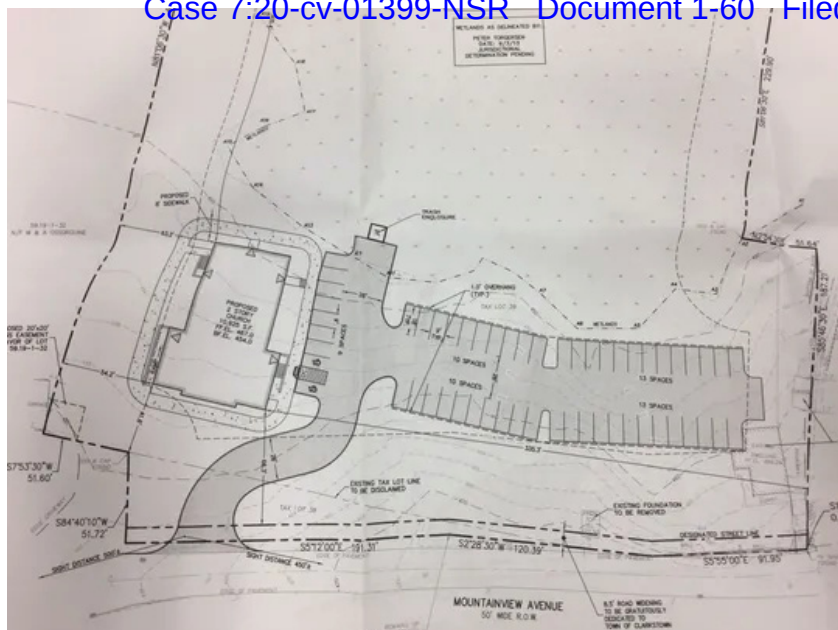
The church's members, consisting of of nearly 30 families, have rented out space for weekly services and held monthly prayer sessions in members' homes, Mathew said.

The church had been searching for years to find a facility until the members — many of whom took out personal loans — pooled their resources to purchase the property.

The preliminary plan includes a main floor and a basement, approximately 5,500 square feet each, and 55 parking spaces. The building would be used for Sunday services, Sunday school for children, monthly prayer meetings, and special programs.

The church's property backs up to the 83-acre Mountainview Nature Park and wetlands.

Mathew said it was unfair for the town to impose the new zoning regulation on the church when it had intended to build there before the rule was in effect.



St. Peter's Syro-Malankara Catholic Church of Rockland has submitted this conceptual plan to Clarkstown to build a two-story, 11,000-square-foot church on Mountainview Avenue. (Photo: Mike D'Onofrio/The Journal News)

He added that churches have always been located within neighborhoods.

"Churches have stood as an anchor point for communities and add to the fabric of the communities, and we hope to be part of that," Mathew said.

Denying the church's request would create a "significant hardship" for its members, Mathew said.

"We are certainly hopeful that we will get the approvals and we are not thinking of any alternatives at this point," he said.

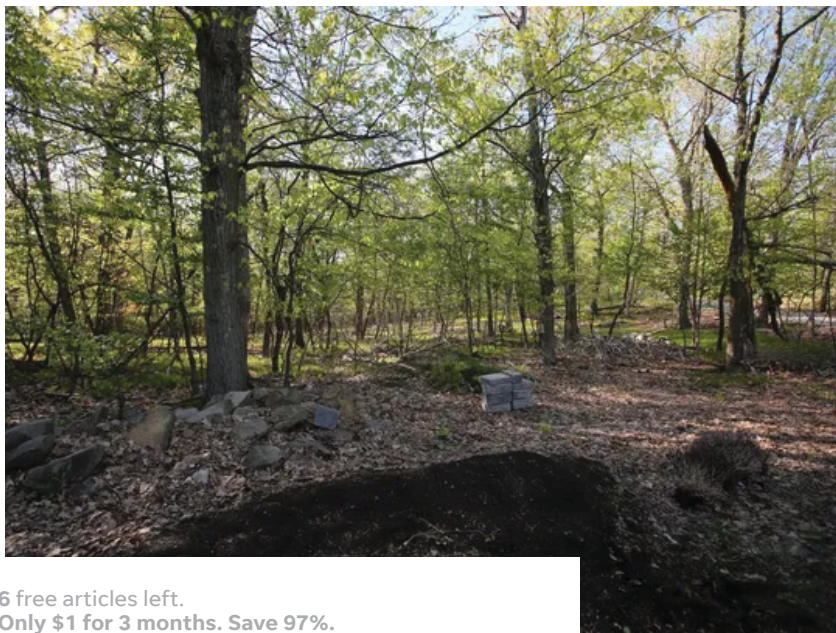
Preserve and protect

Valley Cottage resident Christina Huber contends the property is not suited for a church or any commercial development.

Huber spoke on a May afternoon alongside fellow resident Mooney in her driveway, which borders St. Peter's property.

The two said Mountainview Avenue was already overdeveloped and overrun with traffic. In addition, the wetlands on the property should be protected to preserve wildlife and prevent flooding issues.

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Huber said the property was "not appropriate for that development. If it got developed, (it) would forever change the wetlands that exist there."

"We're not against what they want to do," Mooney said. "Just don't do it here."

Granting a variance for the church, neighbors said, would undermine the new law and set a precedent.

A neighborhood coalition has sprung up — [Mountainview Preservation Group \(https://www.facebook.com/groups/1901983236687425/\)](https://www.facebook.com/groups/1901983236687425/) — to advocate for the area's residential character. The group has gathered more than 600 signatures from residents who oppose the project, and reached out to local and state leaders.

"We're not going away," Mooney said.

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